

## D&D Fiction

# Shadows of Stormreach: Chapter 5

*Eberron Fiction  
by Keith Baker*



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*The bustling frontier city of Stormreach, a cauldron on ambition and secret plots, has grown safe and secure as the only gateway to the riches of Xen'drik. But now danger threatens!*

So begins the introduction to [Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach](#). Can you discover the secret mysteries that threaten Stormreach's very existence? For that, you'll need to learn more about this city of Eberron -- continuing with this latest chapter in Keith Baker's latest tale: *Shadows of Stormreach*.

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Spike was enjoying himself.

He didn't care about their quest. He didn't share Marcus's religious convictions. He didn't understand Shadow's concerns about guild rivalries, and it never occurred to him to wonder why a smuggler like Link would want them to investigate a gang of thieves. None of that mattered. The only thing on his mind was battle. The chaos of combat was the only time he truly felt at peace. In battle, every motion made sense. His path was always clear; he didn't have to think, he could just let go and let his instincts guide him.



The enemy barely mattered. He had been assigned to protect Shadow, and it was her job to choose their battles. He barely saw the faces of the thieves he brought down. He saw weapons and armor, experiencing the world through his analysis of threat and vulnerability.

The Bilge Rats provided a few delightful moments of conflict, but the battle was all too brief. Shadow was a deadly archer. Petra's magic brought down human and wererat with equal ease. Marcus stood shoulder to shoulder with Spike and called on the power of his faith to shield his allies from harm. Within minutes they had made their way through the warehouse. Spike felt a surge of disappointment as it became clear that the last of their foes had fallen.

"We could check the next warehouse," he suggested.

The others weren't listening. Petra was holding the blob of flesh in her palm, saying something about locks and thoughts. He liked Petra well enough – she used her spells to repair him when he was damaged in battle – but he found it almost impossible to listen to her talk.

“Spike?” Shadow said.

He turned towards her. When Shadow spoke, he set everything else aside.

“Petra asked you to move that crate,” Shadow said, pointing.

Spike didn’t ask why. It didn’t really matter. The crate in question was quite large, and Spike threw his full weight against it, which turned out to be far more force than the job required. Far from being loaded with weighty goods, the large box was little more than a shell; Spike’s action sent it flying to the side, where it shattered against a mass of stacked barrels. A wave of embarrassment flowed over Spike. This was far from the first time that he’d applied too much force to a problem, with dramatic results; at least the box wasn’t alive. Unless it was. After all, *he* was made of metal and wood, and he was alive.

“It wasn’t alive, was it?” he said.

The others were ignoring him again, looking at what had been hidden beneath the crate. A large square hatch was set into the floor, carved from thick densewood and bound in steel. But what seemed to interest Petra was the flesh. Veins and ropes of muscle ran along the rim of the hatch, and these twitched and trembled. It *was* alive! He glanced over at the shattered crate, but it was too late for an apology.

Petra knelt over the hatch. She was talking again, and with some effort Spike made himself listen.

“... contact telepathy,” Petra said. She held out her hand. The strange little creature stayed stuck to her palm in defiance of gravity. “When I touch the symbiant to the thought node by the hinges, the door will open.”

“Whatever’s beneath this hatch,” Shadow said, “these thieves thought it was worth dying for. They broke alliances that have been in place for decades. Now we get our answers. Spike, I want you right by the hatch, but *do not go in* until I give the order. There’s probably some sort of trap, and we can’t afford another accident! Understood?”

Spike nodded. This could mean another battle!

Shadow wasn’t done. “I mean it, Spike. If something comes out of the hatch, I need you to engage. Otherwise, you wait for my signal. Clear?”

“Yes.” Why was she so worried?

“Good. Marcus ...” Shadow hesitated. Spike noticed that she rarely asked Marcus to use his magic. “I don’t know what we’ll find, but a prayer would probably do us all a world of good.”

“Obviously,” said Marcus.

Spike knew little about religion and had never cared to learn, but he did find Marcus’s prayers to be comforting. Even though he rarely listened to the words, Spike always found that he was filled with energy when Marcus invoked the Flame.

Petra pressed her palm against the pulsing rim of the hatch. The muscle spasmed, and the hatch flew open, forced up by a fleshy tentacle pressing against the bottom of the gate. A short tunnel lay below: simple stonework with iron rungs set into the wall, and—

### *Movement!*

Light reflected off of metal. A sword! Spike dove forward, leaping feet-first down the tunnel. He heard Shadow's whispered curse as he descended, and it occurred to him that she'd told him to wait, but surely she'd have changed her mind if she'd known there were enemies below.

Even as he fell, Spike was studying the environment. *One enemy. Heavy armor. Greatsword.* Spike struck the ground with a clang. He landed on his feet and swung his axe at the enemy's neck. Spike took pride in his decapitations, and he was already imagining the arc of the tumbling head.

Reality failed to meet his expectations. Spike's enemy was remarkably swift and brought up its blade in time to save its head. The greatsword couldn't deflect the full force of the blow, but it slowed it down. When Spike's axe struck his enemy's neck, he met with unexpected resistance. It was a curious sensation, and Spike looked at his opponent's face—and was truly surprised for the first time in months.

He was fighting a warforged.

The warforged had been built for battle and sold to all of the nations that fought in the Last War. This wasn't the first time Spike had faced one of his own kind. But the warforged were relatively few in number, and it was still a strange experience to stare into a face that mirrored his own.

Especially when that mirror was so horribly flawed.

The enemy was a warforged soldier, and his silhouette was almost identical to Spike's. But this was where the resemblance ended. The soldier was painted in garish colors, and patterns of spidery runes were etched across its torso. Stranger still, Spike could see tendrils of flesh twisted around the creature's left arm—strands of bloody muscle that burrowed into the joints.

As unusual as the creature was, the most disturbing aspect was its face. Each warforged bore a distinctive mark on its forehead, a symbol as unique and integral to its identity as a human's fingerprints. This symbol had been gouged out of the head of this strange soldier, along with its eye-crystals. The eyesockets were dark and empty, but the gap in its forehead was filled with a terrible radiance. The instant Spike saw that light, he felt a terrible sense of vertigo. The wound expanded before him. It was a vast pit, and he was tumbling into it. Strange sounds filled his mind—laughter, a hundred sobbing children, the music of instruments he couldn't begin to imagine. And through the disorientation, he was vaguely aware that the soldier was raising its sword to strike.

The blow never fell. Spike felt a faint sensation of heat, and then the light was torn away. An armored shape brushed past him. *Marcus.* Spike's vision returned, and he saw the cleric locked in battle with the twisted warforged. Marcus deflected a savage attack with his shield, and there was a burst of light and heat: a mystic blast from Petra, who had dropped down into the tunnel behind Spike. The scorching ray caught the enemy warforged full in the face, and its metal skin glowed red as a blade in the forge. Then Marcus's morningstar struck home. Drops of molten metal went flying, and the soldier collapsed.

Petra began talking immediately, something about ruins and giants and ancient warforged, but Spike ignored

her. He stared at the shattered corpse, and one thought dominated his mind.

“Do you think there are more of them? I didn’t get to hit that one.”

Shadow had finally made her way down from the warehouse. The drop to the floor was considerably farther for the little halfling. Her face was flushed, and Spike was certain she was going to shout at him. In the end, she just placed a hand on his knee.

“Let’s find out,” she said. “But this time, let me lead the way.”

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## About the Author

**Keith Baker** has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of Eberron to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the ***Eberron** Campaign Setting* and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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